

# **The Parenting Place**

## **Background**

The Parenting Place programming is guided by the need for prevention services for families not involved in the child protective system. A shift in state level funding to an intervention and treatment focus leaves many families ineligible for support services unless they become involved in the child protective system. This means that there must be suspicion of abuse or neglect already occurring within the household. The Parenting Place has always served these families as part of our general services to the community, but our agency strives to serve *all* families with young children.

For 25 years, it has been the mission of The Parenting Place to *prevent* child abuse and neglect by reaching families *before* abuse has occurred. The continued absence of funding, save Montana Children's Trust Fund, for child abuse *prevention* increases the critical need for these services to be provided to parents of young children through other sources.

Funding comes from Montana Children's Trust Fund, United Way, class fees, local foundations and community support.

## **Corrections**

With the on-going support of Missoula Correctional Services, we are proposing to expand our current "parent aide" program by extending our outreach to incarcerated fathers. We will be mentoring not only the incarcerated parent, but also their extended families or those adults providing guardianship of their children as well.

The supplementary component to mentoring will be on-site parent education classes, where we reach a wider audience with parenting information. The goal of this project is to prevent generational abuse, neglect and future criminality by providing incarcerated parents (with an increased focus on fathers) and their extended families with parent education, social and emotional support and child development information in the form of long-term home visiting services and respite care.

## **Services**

Priority will be given to those parents who:

- voluntarily elect to have a parent aide
- do not have open Children and Family Services cases
- have children aged prenatal to five years
- have not had their children previously removed from the home

1. Long-term home visiting: The parent aide will be a positive parenting role model, a mentor and a link to the community for incarcerated parents and their extended families. This model will allow the parent aide to work with at least 18 incarcerated parents or extended family in a guardianship role, which will include 12-16 children over the course of 12 months. Of those 18 parents or caregivers, eight will be male. Parent aides are professionally trained individuals receiving 12 hours of initial training on such topics as recognizing and reporting child abuse, cultural sensitivity, boundaries, community resources, communication styles and documentation requirements. Ongoing monthly training and weekly supervision are an integral part of the parent aide program as well. Another key aspect of this project is that parent aides are available evenings and weekends when crises are more likely to occur, and can supplement services of the primary case manager.

2. Parent education classes (on-site): Providing consistent parent education classes, facilitated by the parent aide, on-site at the Missoula correctional facility will increase the parent aides' credibility with parents and introduce more of them to the parent aide program. By providing this service to incarcerated parents, regardless of their involvement in the parent aide program, we are offering an opportunity for improved parenting skills with "no strings attached."

3. Respite care: High-quality child care is also a key to a successful strategy for preventing child abuse, stabilizing families and avoiding more costly foster care placements or institutionalization. According to the National Respite Coalition, the provision of respite care in conjunction with a sound prevention strategy, can dramatically reduce the instance of child abuse and neglect by increasing parent coping skills, improving access to social and health services and reducing family isolation and the stress of daily demands. "Research clearly indicates the factors which affect parents and increase the risk of child abuse and neglect, while programs which provide support through nurturance and advocacy decrease that risk," the coalition has found. Respite is an investment that can reduce family stress and the abuse that may result. Many communities where these programs are located have reported reductions in costly out-of-home placements, as well as enhanced family well being. In a family support survey by the National Respite Coalition, 82 percent of families who use respite and crisis-care services survey identified respite as a critical component of family support.

### **Goals**

By combining respite care with our home-visiting program, we will:

- Assure working families that their children are well cared for and minimize the stress of combining work and parenting
- Increase parents' skill in coping with the pressures of caring for their children
- Enhance communication between parents and children
- Reduce family isolation
- Improve access to social and health services for families
- Offer families respite from the daily demands of caring for their children.

Mentoring, with increased outreach to fathers, in combination with respite child care and on-site parent education will help us reach our goals by more effectively working with the family unit. Project objectives include the provision of goal based home visiting

services, parent education and support, and respite child care services to address parental attitudes and behaviors, social isolation, parent/child relationships and reduction of parental stress.

### **Corrections Project Summary**

The Parenting Place proposes to provide a combination of mentoring, on-site parent education classes and respite child care to a highly under-served population of at-risk families, as well as their extended family, who are currently involved in prerelease or parole programs through Missoula Correctional Services.

According to treatment coordinators at Missoula Correctional Services, at least 65 percent to 70 percent of the men and women they serve have children. Many of these men and women are entering the “active” parenting role for the first time, depending on their period of incarceration, and have limited parenting skills from which to draw.

The children of these incarcerated parents are often placed with extended family members who have little or no parenting knowledge or skill as well. It is crucial that these parents and guardians learn appropriate parenting skills so they do not perpetuate the generational cycle of abuse, neglect and future criminality.

Statistics point to a high probability that many of these parents had a history of abuse or neglect in their own childhood. A 1999 study by the U.S. Department of Justice shows that the number of female prison inmates who reported being abused as children was 36.7 percent in state facilities and 23 percent in federal facilities. Among male inmates, the National Institute of Justice reported in 1998 that 68 percent of incarcerated felons reported some form of child abuse and 23 percent experienced multiple forms of abuse and neglect. Due in part to the high number of these adult males who report some form of child abuse prior to incarceration, The Parenting Place will increase outreach to the larger population of fathers in Missoula.

Children who are abused or neglected are 67 times more likely to commit crimes as juveniles or adults than their non-abused peers, according to a 1998 report by the Child Welfare league of America. According to Montana Board of Crime Control statistics, the number of juvenile crimes has steadily increased in Montana over the past five years. A 2000 study showed that adults who were abused or neglected as children scored lower on an IQ scale, held significantly more menial and semi-skilled jobs, had higher odds of committing crimes as adults, and were more likely to have attempted suicide and developed antisocial personality disorders.

The financial cost of treating and incarcerating juveniles and adults is astronomical. The cost of prevention is more reasonable and the benefits far-reaching. It is simply sound policy to intervene early with at-risk families to prevent child abuse and the resulting societal ills.

Parents who have the support and tools to nurture and guide their young children can end the cycle of violence and raise healthy, productive citizens. However, the population of parents we are targeting:

- lack the social supports to raise their children with adequate information and confidence

- lack healthy models for positive parenting
- will be coping with the intense stress of finding and maintaining employment (more than likely at minimum wage).

Poverty and unemployment can cause excessive stress and therefore intensify the risk of abuse and neglect. The most recent numbers indicate that more than one out of five Missoula children are living in poverty, with nearly half of impoverished children living in “deep poverty,” which is half of the federal poverty level.

The most significant reason for children being removed from their homes is physical neglect, which ties to a family’s inability to provide for the child’s physical well being because of poverty or incognizance.

And, since poverty is an indicator of child abuse and neglect, Montana ranks high in the category of need. It had the second highest rate of increase in childhood poverty in the nation in the 1990 census. Seven years later, the U.S. Census Bureau reported Montana’s situation continued to decline. In fact, Montana was ranked as the state whose poverty rate grew more than any other state in the nation.

Finally, what is apparent from the literature is that the prevention of intergenerational transmission of maltreatment is possible. Experiencing child maltreatment need not inevitably doom a child to repeat that violence. If therapeutic experiences can instill a sense of trust and self-worth, while providing behavioral skills to deal with other people, particularly in charged situations, then there is every reason to expect that the effects of child maltreatment can be ameliorated.

The goal of The Parenting Place parent aide project is to prevent generational abuse, neglect and future criminality by providing incarcerated parents and their extended families, and guardians of their children with parent education, social and emotional support and child development information in the form of long-term home visiting services and respite care.

The objectives of the program are to:

- provide parent aide services to 18 or more parents, at least eight of which will be fathers referred by Missoula Correctional Services, who have children up to 12 years old and at risk of abuse and neglect.
- provide parent education and support to at least 12 incarcerated parents or their extended families through parenting classes and support groups.
- assist in developing family and personal goals through home visiting services.
- develop positive parent-child relationships through home visiting services lasting at least one year.
- address risk factors for child abuse, including but not limited to social isolation and lack of parenting knowledge through home visiting services, respite care, support groups and family fun activities.
- provide respite care for at least five children of families referred by Missoula Correctional Services.

The Parenting Place regularly administers self-evaluation questionnaire to every parent who attends parenting classes or support groups, and participates in the parent aide

program. This year, 92 percent of parents tested before and after involvement in the program showed a reduction in abusive attitudes in at least one of the five areas, and 90 percent of parents surveyed felt more confident as parents after completing parent education classes.

Research shows that parents are less likely to abuse or neglect their children when they have social supports; feel more confident as parents; and have more knowledge of stress management, child development and behavior and positive discipline.

The Parenting Place approach – intensive, multi-session classes, in conjunction with the parent aide program – helps parents reduce isolation and build social supports and parenting knowledge. The parent aide program, parent education classes, support groups and free children's program help parents and children learn positive family interactions and discipline strategies that foster confident, knowledgeable parents who are less likely to abuse and neglect their children.